

Stinging Nettle Fibre

First, a story about a princess's quest to rescue her brothers who had been turned into swans by their evil stepmother. To rescue them the princess had to collect nettle, spin it into yarn and knit jackets, all the while remaining silent. She had many adventures while she worked mainly due to the fact that she could not speak. Eventually she was accused of being a witch and just as she was about to be dragged to the village green to be burnt at the stake, some swans flew over on their spring return to the north and circled her. She threw the jackets up to them and they turned back into handsome princes and saved her. One brother had feathers instead of fingers on his left hand because his sister did not have quite enough nettle to finish the sleeve of his jacket. (Hans Christian Andersen: The Wild Swans)

Now , some facts

- * Nettle fibre has been used for 2,000 years for clothing and fine linen Scotch cloth was believed to be originally made from nettle fibre. Nettle fibre only went into decline with the production of cotton
- * The Germans in World War I used nettle fibre to produce uniforms because it was no longer possible to get cotton from the USA
- * Different types of nettles produce different amounts of fibre. The common British nettle (*Urtica Dioca*) is small and can only produce a little fibre.
- * Nettle fibre has fire retardant properties

To make your own nettle fibre first, pick some nettles but what you pick and when you pick them will make a difference:

'In every situation and different soil, the most productive nettles are found to be those which have the smoothest and more concave tubes, the largest joints, the fewest leaves and which produce the least quantity of seed.'

Edward Smith (1803)

You tend to find these nettles in light shade. Nettles growing in full sun are covered with seed heads. Nettles growing in deep shade tend to grow tall with fewer leaves but the stems are too spindly. The best time to pick the nettles is from the beginning of July to the end of August but if the weather is fine you could try picking them in September or October as well. If the weather changes in the later months, and you cannot ret the nettles (see below), you can leave them under cover to dry until the spring.

Once you have collected the nettles, snip the leaves off with a pair of scissors. If you pull them off they tend to pull some of the stem fibre off as well. Tie the stems into bundles and leave hanging to dry for a week. You will notice that the stems will shrivel a bit, particularly if it is very hot.

Next you need to ret (rot) the stems. To do this put the stems in a container and cover them with water (preferably rain water) and put something (I used a brick) in the container to hold the stems down.

'The time required for steeping them is from five to eight days, but it is better that they should remain rather too long in the water than too short a time, yet great care should be taken they are not underdone. When the fibre approaches to a pulp and will easily separate from the reed and the reed becomes brittle and assumes a white appearance, that operation is finished.'

Edward Smith (1803)

I found that the stems still looked greenish after 8 days. However, take them out of the water (you may need a peg for your nose!), rinse them a little and leave them to ret a bit more on the grass. Put some netting below the nettles (to make turning easier) and more netting over the nettles (to stop the birds taking them for nest building) and turn them each day. Within a very short time you will notice that they have turned white and some fibre will be visible hanging from the stems.

The next step is to separate the fibre from the rotted stems. One method is to wrap the nettles in muslin and put into a cool oven (80C) for about an hour or until the nettles are brittle. Take the bundle out of the oven and put it onto a wooden board. Pound the bundle with a wooden meat tenderiser. When you have pounded it enough you will see, once you have undone the muslin, that the fibres have miraculously separated from the stem material. It takes some time to pick out the fibres but then you will have something to spin.